

A future that still has a past to resolve

Tyrone Williams

2023

a review of

Present Continuous by David Grundy. Pamernar, 2022

As David Grundy notes in “Catalogue,” the first of fifteen essays that comprise his new book, the ongoing Covid pandemic has served as yet another mode of “normalization” under the grindstone of late capital: “We’ll face the constant injunction to adjust to the ‘new normal’: normality in abnormality, an extension of the fucked-up methods that already exist; the retreat to the virtual for those waiting for Deliveroo, Uber, and Amazon drop-offs, while the deaths pile up in the warehouses, or the skyscraper shadows below.”

Divided into six essays covering spring/summer 2020, six covering autumn/winter 2020–2021 and three covering spring 2021, *Present Continuous* is a record of a specific period during the pandemic, the first national lockdowns in England in 2020.

Based in Lewisham, London, Grundy, a poet, essayist, critic and publisher, guides his readers through some of the conversations, music, and books that sustained him between 2020 and 2021. While the bulk of the essays record walk-and-talk outings around London that Grundy took with his partner and friends. They lead to individual and collective ruminations on sociality under lockdown and the sporadic resistance to the normalization of police and state violence in all its forms. The essays concern, to one degree or another, the all-too-human tendency to seek in nature an escape from human crises.

Grundy is not immune to this tendency to romanticize nature, the normality of spring and summer, blooming flowers and singing birds, offering psychic relief from the mind-numbing daily roll calls of the dead and dying. Still, to his credit, He demonstrates how “nature” is not only a by-product of culture, but also how various facets of the “natural” world have different consequences for different classes of humans.

For example, in his discussion of one of the last letters French philosopher Simone Weil wrote shortly before her death in 1943, Grundy quotes her observation on what he calls “the unequal distribution of sensory experience across class lines.”

Even as Weil welcomes “a wind and a little rain” to relieve the summer’s “suffocating torpor,” she recognizes that not all Londoners welcome the drop in temperature: “This weather must be a trial for the people in factories,” she writes, and in her notebooks, she continues to explore the problem of labour, of occupation; the problem of pain and of a landscape, a social cityscape, occupied Paris, in a period of catastrophic political defeat.”

Weil’s refusal to naturalize nature, to accept seasonal cycles as unmitigated goods, resonates with Canadian poet Lisa Robertson’s laconic remark, “Here by landscape I mean political economy,” cited approvingly by Grundy who links the violent murders of women in and around London with the way that landscaping often abets their deaths: “Bibaa Henry. Nicole Smallman. Sarah Everard. Country parks, royal parks, a sanatorium in Ashford, a field near Ashford, Clapham Common...”

Although Grundy ranges over a number of themes in all three sections, the book, as a whole, is framed by two essays, “Catalogue” and “The Day Should End,” that consider the consequences of what he calls “clock” time, which

Grundy will consider, with ambivalence, in relation to other modes of measuring time (e.g., musical time signatures).

“Catalogue” is an analysis of the taxonomic impulse to list, classify, categorize, and assign letters or numbers to natural and cultural phenomena. The analysis leads to a discussion of the mid-20th century composer Olivier Messiaen’s *Catalogue d’oiseaux*, a piano solo for birds. Grundy recognizes in Messiaen’s aesthetic achievement a template for the primitive foundation for capital: the conversion of “natural” languages (birdsong) into “cultural” ones (music), a mode of “translation” that goes hand-in-hand with the reduction of natural temporal changes to musical time signatures.

Or, as Grundy puts it, “...we imbue birdsongs, their signals of warning or desire or the marking of territory, with the supposedly transcendent function of aesthetic purity, standing in for all that we can’t name but wished were true.”

The effect is a conflation of the natural and cultural, so much so that during “the first few days of house-bound distancing,” Grundy, alone in his apartment, opens his window to “birdsong and building work and sirens and I’m not sure if silence or noise is more reason for alarm.” Grundy’s indecisiveness regarding the peril implicit in noise (the triumph of capital cacophony over natural sounds) or its absence (that eerie silence that pervaded cities during lockdowns) foreshadows the last essay of the book where, writing about poet Fanny Howe’s book of poems, *O’ Clock*, Grundy worries over a line from one of her poems, “the day should end.” Grundy considers its negative implications (“the end of everything”) and its positive possibilities (the end of capital and alienated social relations, the permanent reduction of carbon dioxide, unlike the temporary reduction that occurred across the globe during the 2020 lockdowns). Grundy concludes with this note:

“Today the clocks are changing; the days extending; the day wrapped in the haze of false spring. That’s the record of official time, change kept and preserved: second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour and day on day, month on month and year on year. And that’s the day that should end, going nowhere fast, running us to hell in a handcart, rattling journey, bodies in transport, common grave. The question is not so much what’s next but how do we end what’s present: from spring to spring.”

What is wanted, he writes, is “Not scaffolding or a building but a lifeline.” This anti-monument, anti-mechanical time gesture runs throughout the book, aligning Grundy with composers, performers and writers whose projects resist, as much as possible, completion into works, into opuses, that create the illusion of frozen time, confining us to this “present” state that seems to have no end.

Thus, Grundy opposes the avian “vertical” aspiration of Messiaen’s piano solos to the “horizontal” minimalism of the contemporary British improvisational piano/singer duet Kerry Yong and Elaine Mitchener whose performances foreground sounds “that move[s] beyond linguistic and sonic classification.”

Likewise, the music of the mid-20th century Greek avant-garde composer Iannis Xenakis, inspired by Greek mythology and literature, “refuses representation” as it showcases “the horrors of war.” In Xenakis’ scores we read “notations of screams—horrible’, ‘hoarse’, ‘rasping’, ‘rough’ as technical indications, weird transmutations, stretching and smearing.” And, when Xenakis sets the poetry of Homer and Sappho to music, the words are “secondary to the rhythmic structures in which they’re contained; sometimes they’re no more than phonemes, meaningless syllabic bursts, consonants and cries, glissandi that refuse gloss...”

At the same time, Grundy reminds us that nature is often repurposed by marginalized populations. Citing a few lines from one of the 18th century American poet Phillis Wheatley’s poems (“There, as in Britain’s favour’d isle, behold/The bending harvest ripen into gold!!!/Just are thy views of Afric’s blissful plain,/On the warm limits of the land and main.”), Grundy reads the invocations of African nature as an implicit critique of the British Empire.

He notes that Wheatley, “taking the West’s promises of freedom and universal emancipation, sacred or secular, at their word, (mis) interpellates herself as a free subject...the unprecedented horror of capitalist world-building and its extra-European despoliations, and Restoration urbanity pushes it out of sight, out of mind, the ‘native grace’ of Wheatley’s Senegambian Eden opens up to a prospect beyond.”

For Grundy, this “beyond” exceeds “the distinctions between hill and vale, meadow and metropolis; of that simple and brutal choice, ‘money or life’, and the way it underwrites the entire system of industrial capitalism, its daily practice of living death, its vice-like grip extending from factory to field, cradle to grave.”

As another example of the way that black citizens repurpose “nature” for a ((prospect beyond,” Grundy crosses the Atlantic to Chicago to consider the case of Adam Hollingsworth, the “Dread-head Cowboy” who joined Black Lives Matter street protests in 2020.

Rehearsing the history of the way that domesticated horses have been used by police forces against ethnic and racial minorities in England and the United States, and before that by Greek and Roman warriors, Grundy sees another example of the way that natural phenomena become natural resources that fuel imperial war and colonial violence. At the same time, he is wary of any appropriation of the symbols of war and conquest insofar as doing so only reifies the hero.

Like much militarized imperial nostalgia, the spectre of the hero is deployed to compensate for the failed promises of wealth, prosperity, and national belonging it attempts to cement. Likewise, Adorno’s enigmatic statement about the survival of the horse from the age of heroes might imply that the horse has unseated its heroic master. “The horse has bolted,” as it were.

Good riddance.

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A future that still has a past to resolve
2023

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Fifth Estate #414, Fall 2023

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